

Faith and Work Reflections

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Imagine. Imagine a kingdom, a glorious kingdom. Beautiful streets with joyous people working, living, and serving. Each person there loves the King for he is kind, forgiving, righteous, and unconditionally loving. The people desire to serve and love the King because they look upon his goodness and long to be better. The Prince of the kingdom has acted on the people's behalf and allows each person to come into the presence of this radiant King. And as the people work and live in the kingdom, an Advocate walks alongside each person, equipping them for every task that is set before them. The people of this kingdom are completely cared for and there is a peace that flows freely.

This kingdom is unlike anything else ever experienced. Each person knows the goodness that is in this place, so much so that they long for more people to live and serve in this kingdom. Therefore, each person's main goal as citizens is to glorify and serve the King while inviting others into this incredible kingdom. And people do so. This kingdom grows and functions through its citizens. Each person has a unique role based on the talents and desires given by the Creator. Everyone doesn't do everything but instead the wise King gives specific tasks to each individual so that there is harmony and completeness. The people work hard and desire to offer their best in their specific role. The citizens rely on the Helper to teach and guide, while following the perfect example of the Prince. In this kingdom, work and serving the King are not separated but are simply part of being a citizen. Their work is their praise and they serve through their work. They serve the King by serving others and they have the joy of being cared for as others serve the King. When needs arise, the King calls people accordingly and when he

calls, the people respond with joy and delight. In this kingdom, there is a reciprocal rhythm that flows within and through the citizens under the headship of the Royalty.

The people also graciously accept the rest offered, trusting that any work that needs to be done will get done because the King manages his kingdom well. The good King cares for his people, never asking them to do more than he knows they can handle. Therefore, each citizen is fulfilled in all aspects of their being, doing the good works that they were created to do and offering praise to the King as they serve. Imagine.

As Christians, we are to both imagine and live this out. We are the citizens, working and serving for the glory of the Lord. We work not for the sake of working but as a means of restoring the goodness that was originally intended. Unfortunately, the goodness originally created was corrupted and we are currently living in a world tainted with brokenness. As citizens of God's kingdom, we live with our eyes set upon the glory of the kingdom while living in the midst of a fallen world. Within the world, each of us has been given a role, called to be ambassadors of the loving King, and offering foretastes of his kingdom.

We need reminders of this, all of this. When we discuss the integration of faith and work, we are essentially reminding each other of kingdom living. Being inundated with many voices demanding our attention, we need the reminders that draw us back to the voice of the good and righteous King as he calls us to specific ways of serving. This paper will focus on three reminders: (1) The goodness of work, (2) We are called, (3) The freedom to dream.

The Goodness of Work

In our culture, we tend to dread those "Monday mornings" because we *must* go back to work and school. In the movie *Kate and Leopold*, on a Saturday night the main character Kate

moaned at the fact that the next day was Sunday because it was the day before Monday, a work day. Could it be that we are a culture that is weighed down by the pressures of work that we have lost the joy in it? Or is it that we move too quickly and miss the original design of a healthy cycle of work and rest? Maybe we have simply lost sight of its beauty and therefore we need to be reminded of the goodness of work.

When I was a teenager, I too ate up the misconceived notion that work is something to dread. My friend and I would sit under a tree and dream of when we will retire. We would say how we wanted to skip over all of the middle-age hardships and simply return back to that tree, old and content. But our simple minds did not fully grasp the vastness that we would miss out on. Meaningful work is not a necessary evil but a basic human need and food for our soul (Keller 2012, 23).

In the creation account, God worked to create a masterpiece and did so “for the sheer joy of it” (21). He created by “forming” and “making” the heavens, earth, animals, and people. In Genesis 2, “there was no one to work the ground” so God formed Adam and breathed life into him. (v. 5, 7) Then God planted a garden and placed man in the garden to “work it and take care of it”. (v. 15) Adam had the privilege of naming the animals (v. 19-20) and was commanded to cultivate all that is on the earth (1:28). God worked, was pleased with all that he made, rested, and then commissioned us to build off of the framework he created. God gave us a perfect example of a rhythm for us to live by.

Having work within our rhythm of life is a privilege. It is where humankind has advanced and developed; cultivating what God has given us. It is also through our work that we can “discover who we are and understand our distinct abilities and gifts”. (Keller 2012, 25) From

there, we are to use these abilities and gifts to serve others for the glory of God and for the common good. Our work is a form of worship and praise. When our family moved into our current neighborhood, we were surrounded by orthodox Jewish families and college students. We quickly learned the difficulty to get to know these neighbors and it was hard to feel welcomed to the neighborhood. However there was one person who welcomed us with a smile and got to know our family. Each day he came by, exchanging brief yet refreshing conversations. It would be a delight when we saw him in the neighborhood. Our daughter has grown up knowing him as "Uncle Russ" and always enjoyed seeing him. In getting to know one another, we learned that we are both Christians so we often shared prayer requests. Our daughter and Uncle Russ would exchange notes and gifts. Unfortunately, one day he told us that he would no longer be in our neighborhood because he was moving to a different route...he was our mailman. His work is more than a job; it is a form of worship and praise. He prayed as he delivered the mail. He got to know the people. And he has blessed our lives through his work.

As citizens of God's kingdom, we live into the calling to love and serve our neighbors. "God does not need our good works, but our neighbor does." (Veith 2002, 38) And we when we offer these good works through our abilities and gifts, we are offering foretastes of the kingdom and restoring "shalom". Amy Sherman describes *shalom* as "universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight". (34) We often hear this word to mean "peace" and Sherman expands this into a four-fold understanding of peace: Peace with God, peace with self, peace with others, and peace with creation. There is beauty, hope, unity, sustainability, intimacy with God all wrapped up into the single word of *shalom*. This is what we are restoring through our work and what we desire for people to experience through our gifts and abilities.

We Are Called

As we continue to discover our unique abilities and use them to serve others in the restoration of *shalom*, we are then living into our vocation. This term comes from the Latin word for "calling" which offers a theological perspective on our vocations. (Veith 2002, 17) We have been called to partner with God for the restoration of a broken world. We have been called into specific roles that align with our gifts and abilities. And we have been called to further God's kingdom by serving the greater community of humanity. However, being called is different than choosing our vocation. There are areas that we want to work in but if we don't have the abilities to do that job or role well then it won't be a good fit. We need to be in tuned to our God-given talents and God-given personality when we are discerning our vocations and understanding our callings. (52) When I started college, I entered with a major in astronomy. Although that was a passion of mine, I struggled in math and without that I knew I wouldn't get far. For a long time I clung to Psalm 37:4 which says, "Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart." I read this verse selfishly, thinking that if I was a good Christian, I would get my desires. And as a young college student, my desire was to be an astronomer. But the more I seriously took delight in the Lord and allowed the Holy Spirit to work within me, the more my desires changed into his desires. After accepting that my abilities weren't lining up with what I thought was my passion, I changed my major to religious studies. I did so joyfully, not reluctantly, because it would be a more enjoyable experience based on the mind that God gave me. And it was! Looking back, I see that I was called by the One who knew me better than I did. He knew what would be most fulfilling for my college experience and how best to shape me as a kingdom citizen. Being called instead of choosing our vocation may sound like a startling

statement but in God's kingdom it is an honor to be called by the good King, which in turn will hopefully stir a desire to choose that calling.

It is important to keep in mind the communal aspect of our vocations. Work is "a contribution to the good of all and not merely a means to one's own advancement". (Keller 2012, 55) As we keep our eyes focused on kingdom living, we need reminders that the purpose of our vocation is to love and serve our neighbors. It can be helpful to ask question such as, "How does my calling serve my neighbor? Who are my neighbors in my particular vocation and how can I serve them with the love of God?" (Veith 2002, 39-40) When we do this we are offering foretastes of the good kingdom that is already present but not yet completely fulfilled.

In finding our vocation or callings, a helpful tool is the "vocational sweet spot" Venn diagram. Described in Sherman's book, there are three circles: God's priorities, my passions and gifts, and the world's needs. At the center, where these three areas overlap is where one's vocational sweet spot will be. (108) This is a three-fold perspective that causes us to look upward (toward God), inward (to our abilities and personality), and outward (to the needs around us). Our vocation is not about us and what makes us happy or successful, rather it is how we can contribute to the world, serve others, and glorify God.

The "vocational sweet spot" offers hope and guidance in the potential confusion of finding our vocations. However, this can also be put on a pedal stool and become the ultimate prize of a long, soul-searching journey. It can bring unnecessary pressure to find the perfect vocation that completely matches their sweet spot. We must learn to keep this in check as it can become an idol and cause us to not be as attentive to the guiding of the Spirit and the calling of the Lord. Veith suggests that there are multiple vocations that a person has based on their

current roles. "Vocation is in the here and now." (49) It isn't something that we are to wait for or hopefully achieve one day, instead vocation is what a person is currently doing and the roles they are living in. If I was to list my current vocations it would be a student, a wife, a mother, a teaching assistant, and a childcare worker. The problem with this is that my list could continue on and I lose the impact of vocation or the importance of finding my vocational sweet spot. While I appreciate his perspective, this can potentially become too broad and ultimately not very helpful. However, there can be a healthy balance between the sweet spot and the plethora of vocations with the language of "seasons". A person goes through different seasons of life and in each one, there could be specific callings. Specific gifts could be utilized, while other gifts may be set aside for that season. It is important to keep the fine balance between the ultimate vocation and the many roles that a person has been called into.

Freedom to Dream

As we have seen, God calls individuals based on their unique abilities and personality. He "equips all people with talents and gifts for various kinds of work, for the purpose of building up the human community". (Keller 2012, 55) The Spirit guides this through holy discontentment, a passion that "wrecks" a person and keeps them up at night. It is a problem in the world that a person wants to and is willing to fix. (Sherman 2011, 127) When taken to the Lord in prayer, he can shape and guide how to fulfill this need through us. This is how we partner with God and how we can remind others of kingdom living.

Being called and having holy discontentment stir within us pushes us to dream. Knowing that the Holy Spirit equips and flows within us gives the freedom to dream. Instead of living our lives trying to figure out "what I am to be?" or "what I am to do", we can ask "what could I do?"

What *could* we do to bring restoration, to show the goodness of God's kingdom, to truly love and serve others? When this becomes our prayer, we are opening ourselves to be used by God. He opens our eyes to new opportunities we may have never seen, gives us ideas that we couldn't imagine, and offers visions to strive towards. This is done within our work, our vocations, and our roles because there isn't a separation between the sacred and the secular. As kingdom citizens, all of our work is a sacred calling. (Veith 2002, 19) We dream for the purpose of God's kingdom and not our own. In order to act upon these dreams, it takes courage and a willingness to be inconvenienced for the sake of others. The empowerment of the Holy Spirit fills us with bravery through joy so that fear does not hinder us from doing the right thing. Therefore, take delight in the freedom to dream with the Lord!

Conclusion

We are kingdom citizens called to live distinct lives in a broken world. As church leaders and brothers and sisters in Christ, we need to remind each other of God's incredible kingdom. We can remind one another of the goodness of work, that we are people called by the good King, and we have the freedom to dream. When we offer these reminders, we help to transform and redeem our view of work.

References

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